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We bought a record about four years ago purely on speculation. It was by a group called Jack O'Fire, who we'd never heard of, on a little label from Austin, Texas, and there were three songs, all of them covers: "Asked For Water," originally written by Howlin' Wolf; "Meet Your Death" by Blind Willie McTell; and "No Love Lost" by Joy Division. Classic blues paired with a song from punk's darkest corner? All of a sudden this little record had our undivided attention. There was no picture of the band, but they were listed as "teachers," and the liner notes proclaimed: "Jack O'Fire is on a mission to educate, liberate, and inspire the young masses by the only means necessary... Rhythm & Blues." The photo on the back sleeve was an arrangement of vintage guitars and a big stand-up bass leaned against a scooter, and all sorts of toys - a robot, a devil's head, and the hunchback - perched atop Kustom and Vox amps. There was a hand-drawn logo of a lion, a clenched fist with a harmonica, the initials I.S.A., and the name Young Lions Conspiracy. The notes had been signed Big Daddy Soul, and ended with the question/challenge: What are you doing to participate?

The record was soon spinning on the turntable, and the room was filled with that big, rumbling bass, a sinuous slide guitar, and the wailing harp, and even "No Love Lost" was transformed into an old roadhouse blues. What was going on here? We had to know more.

Slowly but surely other records appeared, always packed with typewritten manifestos (I.S.A. was revealed as Integrity, Soul, and Attitude, the basic principles of the Young Lions Conspiracy, of which Jack O'Fire was an early and ardent supporter), and casting an ever-wider net across musical eras and categories in search of a boundless, timeless, *soulful noise*. It was something we had to witness for ourselves, but Jack O'Fire almost never played outside of Texas, and by the time we realized we had to go on tour to see them, they were no more.

At the center of Jack O'Fire had been Tim Kerr, whose story begins in the late '70s with the legendary Big Boys, and continues through the garage stomp of Poison 13, the big band funk of Bad Mutha Goose, and the Monkeywrench as a postscript to Poison 13 and a prelude to Jack O'Fire in the '90s. His personal and musical reunion with Poison 13's Mike Carroll has given birth to a new group called Lord High Fixers. Needless to say, we wasted little time in getting down to Austin to see them for ourselves. And it was well worth the trip. They play as if every show is going to be their last: total energy, totally alive, anything can happen, and joyful in the extreme. (Since they don't exactly go out on the road very often, you've got to catch them when and where you can. Their next show is July 20 in Las Vegas, so if you're feeling lucky...)

Tim Kerr would just be embarrassed to death if he were referred to as a musical living legend, and since we think the world of the guy and what he stands for, we're not going that route. Suffice to say he's been in six bands over the last twelve years that have really meant something - maybe not to record company execs or the Billboard Top 100 - but to almost everyone who's ever had the chance to see them play. Tim Kerr's music comes straight out of the community spirit and freedom that defined punk in its infancy, combined with the firm belief that music can't exist without heavy doses of Integrity, Soul, and Attitude.

We went down to Austin to interview Tim Kerr and to see the Lord High Fixers play. We met him at a huge record fair, spent most all our money, and went back to his place for a nice, long talk on a bright, summery March afternoon.

tim kerr

WITH BOB NICKAS AND JOHN TREMBLAY

BN So what records did you get at the fair today?

TK I got the Five Stair Steps and Cubie, which is great. It's got the song "You Don't Change Your Love," which Curtis Mayfield wrote, and it's on Curtom, which is his label. I got Major Lance, which is really great. He sounds just like Curtis Mayfield. I got the Dick Gregory at Kent State album. The pictures on it are wonderful. I got John Mayall's BluesBreakers' Crusade, where they all look like they're holdin up protest signs. I've never seen that one.

BN "The blues needs your support."

TK I got the Milkshakes' 14 Rhythm & Beat Greats, but I may already have that. Phil Ochs' Chords of Fame. He's great. Picksville Jazzville, Volume 4, because the cover has a wonderful Lambretta LD on it, just like my scooter.

BN Wow.

TK The Impressions, who are great.

JT People Get Ready!

TK Digging for Gold, Volume 1 and Volume 5, that's the new one. Have you ever heard this stuff? It's all like really freak beat. I got Dustbin Full of Rubbish, and Hugh Masakela, African trumpet jazz. And Jimmy Magriff.

BN It looks like he's five-years-old! That's incredible.

TK I've got to play this Five Stair Steps for you. It's just great.

BN Do you remember the first record you ever bought as a kid, or what first got your attention?

TK Soul music. My oldest brother is ten years older, and my other brother is eight years older than me. And he listened to Elvis Presley and Jimmy Dean and stuff like that, which I hated. But thank god, Steve, my oldest brother, listened to soul the whole time. And I was totally into that. And then all of a sudden here came the Beatles, and the British invasion, and that was kinda mine. I think the first record I ever bought was at a 7 Eleven. I was in the first grade, the Beatles had played on Ed Sullivan, and all these people were cashin in on it. They were doin these things like The Beats, who looked like the Beatles and had songs like "I Saw Her Standing There," and if you're a little kid, you don't know...

JT They duped you!

TK So I bought it and took it home and thought, this is great.

BN What kinds of things were you

listening to then that you still listen to now?

TK I always remember The Intruders' "Cowboys To Girls." Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions are the greatest ever, period. I liked Archie Bell and the Drells. They were from Houston.

JT Tighten Up.

TK Back then, all the soul stations were at the very end of the AM dial, and in the Big Boys we would say, "let's go further down the dial."

BN When did you start playing an instrument?

TK In elementary school. I had an acoustic guitar and I took lessons for about a month, but the woman wanted to teach me "Down the Valley," and I wanted to learn Beatles songs, so I quit and started playin by ear, and makin up songs. But once I learned how to finger pick, that just totally changed everything. I started listenin to real early Bruce Cockburn, Nick Drake, John Martin, Pentangle, and all that British stuff. And right around then, like junior high, was when Cream and Black Sabbath and all that was comin out, but I just wasn't into it.

BN At the same time there was a whole English music scene discovering the blues. Did that interest you?

TK I was in a small little Texas town, forty minutes away from Houston, and we would pick up Pacifica. But by the time I heard more of John Mayall and Howlin Wolf and T. Bone Walker, I was so totally locked-in to acoustic guitars that I didn't want to hear electric. All through high school I was a total purist. "Stairway To Heaven"... that sucked. But play that thing on acoustic guitar and it'd be wonderful.

JT Have you ever heard Tiny Tim's version?

TK No, that'd be pretty horrible. [laughter]

And I saw a bunch of those bands because there wasn't anything to do where we were, so I would go with friends to Houston to see Humble Pie and Led Zeppelin, but I could care less.

BN What did you hear that made you put the acoustic guitar down, and plug in?

TK I was workin in a record store and punk rock happened, and here in Austin it all happened pretty fast.

JT That was '77, '78

TK Right. My first memory is hearin Elvis Costello, and seein Devo on TV and just laughin and laughin. It was just

from him, the first note hits and the kids all jump up and grab hold of him to sing along, and all of a sudden just step WAY BACK...

[laughter]

...and the rest of the night nobody got on stage cause everybody was like, what the fuck is all over him?

BN How did things move from the Big Boys to Poison 13, which is such a totally different sound? You went from all that craziness to a very stripped down rockin' blues band.

TK What happened was that Mike Carroll, the singer in Poison 13, had been the roadie for Big Boys, and way before anybody else he listened to garage stuff. And he would have tapes when we were on tour, so I'd hear Chocolate Watchband and think, man, this sounds like when I was growin up. Who is this? And Mike wanted to be in a band but was really shy, so after the last Big Boys tour, we hadn't broken up, but we decided to take a break, and I told him, Mike, I'll get some people together, and we'll do whatever you want. It's your band, we'll play one night at the Continental Club, it'll be your night, and it'll be great.

BN So the whole idea of Poison 13 was just that one show for Mike?

TK Right. And when we started Poison 13 we said, okay, if we do this we're not singin anything that's socially conscious at all, just sing about dyin and gettin drunk and drivin fast cars and killin people, and that's what we're gonna sing about.

BN To avoid what?

TK So we wouldn't have anything that people could rally around. With Big Boys the responsibility was just too much. It was just nuts. So we didn't want to have any kind of socially conscious message, or anything to rally around.

BN Little did you know, but then people would want to rally around drinking and dying.

TK Down here they didn't, but that was basically the whole idea, just get up there and play. I mean, Austin, and Texas in general... it's blues. So we're gonna get up there and play "Spoonful." This'll be great, let's play it as slow as we possibly can, and just bum everybody out. Just havin fun with the whole thing. And then somebody wanted us to record an album, and we were mostly doin covers, but thought, okay, whatever, and we did. To this day, most all the stuff we did, there has never really been a plan.

It's just been like, Oh, we could do that? Let's do that. That'll be kinda cool. Like puttin out records. You saw other people doin it so it's like, let's put one out too.

BN After Poison 13 you ended up in a band that almost picks up from where the Big Boys were at the end, playing big band funk.

JT Bad Mutha Goose.

TK Right, but like I say, there's just a thread that runs through it all.

The same day that I got out of Poison 13, I was at a show that night, and Billy, who had been there from all the punk rock stuff, came up to me and was like, I want to start this funk band, and you gotta play guitar. And I said, if we're gonna do it, I don't want to do funky rock, and I don't want to do punk-funk. If you wanna play funk, cool, I'm into that. And the next day we were playin.

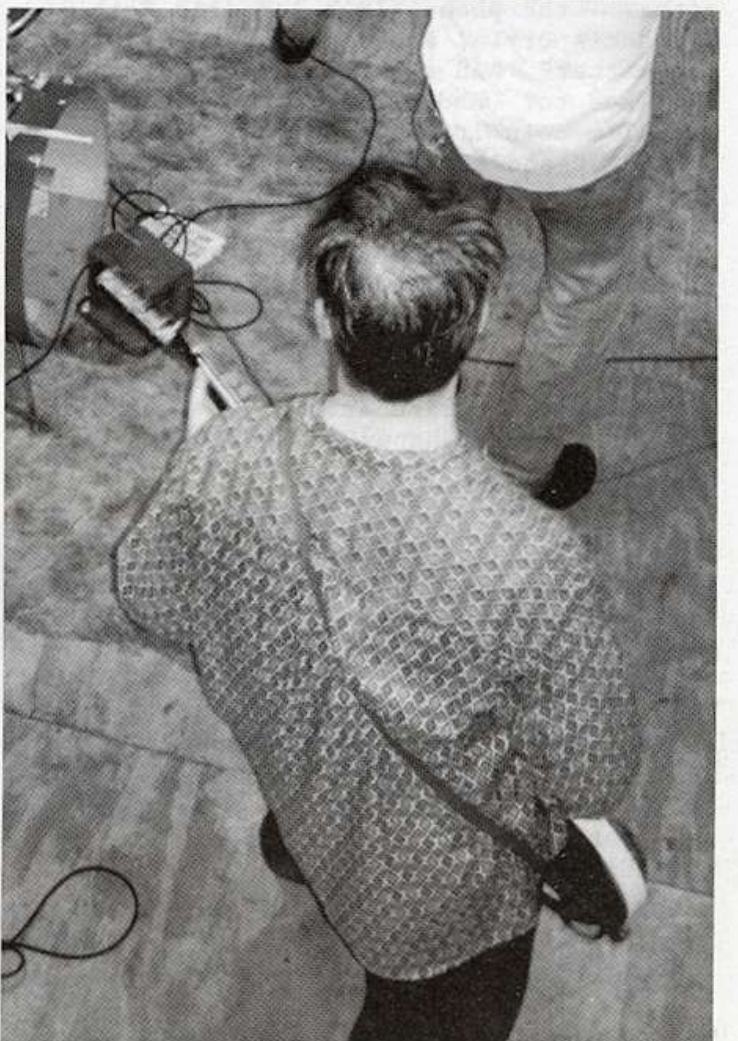
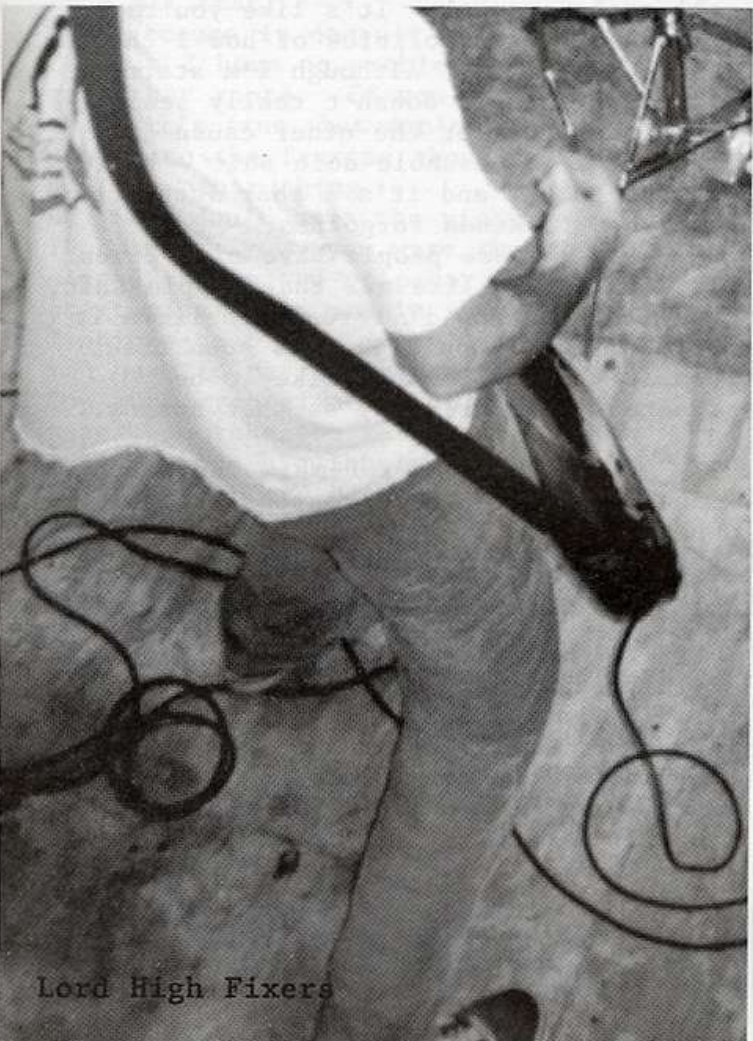
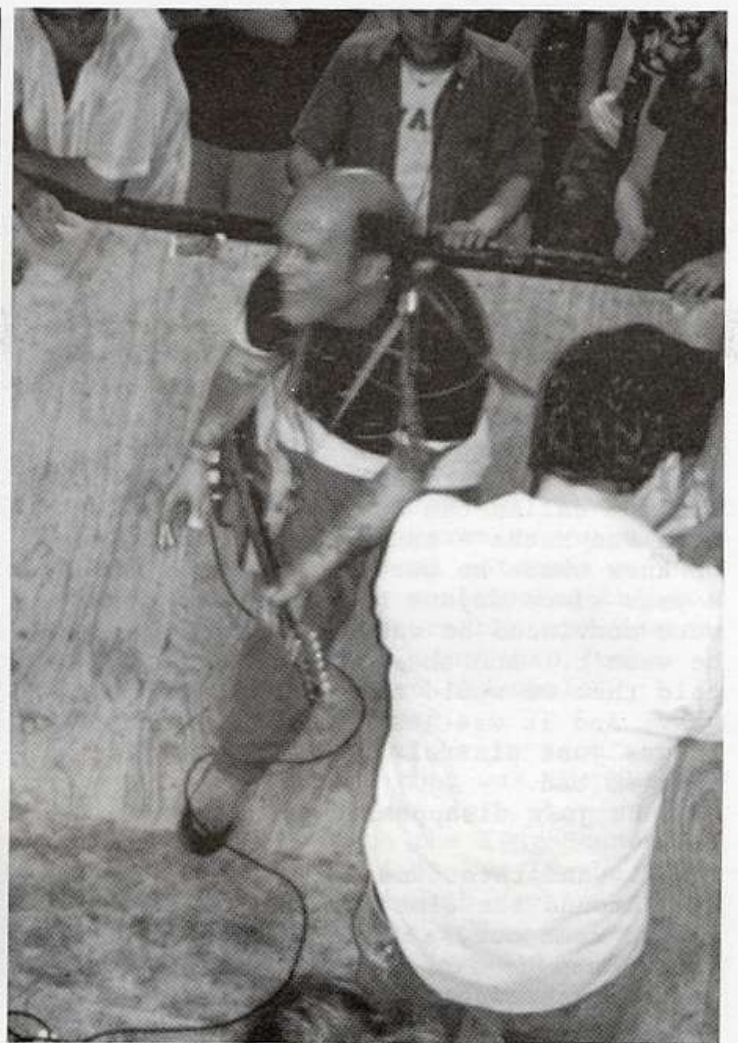
BN Didn't that band generate a lot of record company interest - the kind you normally shy away from?

TK I totally loved Bad Mutha, but all the major label bullshit we had to go through, you know... There's pretty much stories to everything, and it's a real personal thing. That's why it's hard for me to get involved with the business. So after that, in The Monkeywrench, a lot of the songs we picked to cover was me, how I felt after that whole situation. Like "Notes and Chords Mean Nothing To Me." I just wanted to get up there and go WAAAAAH! You know, just play. "Stop This World, I Want To Get Off," was literally me sayin "Let me outa here, this is nuts."

BN So how did The Monkeywrench happen?

TK I had gone to see Mudhoney cause I just wanted to see what they were like. I'd heard about them, and when I met Mark and them, they came up and were like, Poison 13, man! We got to be really good friends, and one day I told em about a bunch of songs that Poison 13 had never recorded, and Mark just totally jumped on it. But I was worried cause I kept thinkin, these are really Mike's songs, it was Mike's band. So I sat for about a week wrestlin with it, but then I started thinkin, well, maybe if we do this, and we make sure his name's on there, then people will go back and listen to Poison 13 and see that, man, he really wrote great lyrics. Like "My Biggest Mistake."

BN That's the best one. "My biggest mistake was when I left you..."



Lord High Fixers

TK And he's singin that all the way through.

JT "When I left you, when I left you..."

TK "When I left you in a shallow grave." And you're just goin, Oh man.

JT Where was Mike?

TK About six or seven months after Poison 13 disbanded, nobody knew where he was. It was just nobody knew, period. And we all kinda thought he'd gone back to Dallas, and we all hoped that cause he could be dead, and we just thought, well, that's where he's at. But one day his mom called the house - I was on tour with Bad Mutha - and she asked Beth if we knew where he was. It had been about a year since anyone had seen him and we were convinced he was at his mom's. But he wasn't. And she said that Mike had told them we would always know where he was. And it was just like... we don't. It was just pitiful, you know, it just felt so bad.

BN He just disappeared over that whole time?

JT ...and then came back?

TK Around the time The Monkeywrench record came out, a friend talked to him, so we knew he was alive, but about another year went by, and I was at work one day - and I won't forget this one, either - the phone rings and it's Beth and she's cryin, and I'm like, what's the matter? And she said, guess who I talked to? And she said, Mike. And see, I'm doin it now, I just totally welled-up and started cryin too. And she said, he's gonna call you tomorrow, and he did. And when he came down here we sat around and talked, but it wasn't until the next day that we started talkin about the music. And The Monkeywrench. And he said, yeah, I heard that.

BN And did he like it?

TK He was real happy with it. I couldn't tell if it was a touchy subject or not, but I tried to explain to him that Poison 13 did somethin back then. And people had been real interested to reissue the stuff, and would he ever like to? And he was like, yeah, that would be nice, and maybe if they put it out we could play, we could do a show. And I was just totally floored. And by this point, Jack O'Fire was goin, and he knew about Jack O'Fire. So I asked if he wanted to sing with us, and see what happened, and he did that. And then he started talkin about wantin to do a band, and he had the name and everything. He already had it all figured out.

JT He came up with the name Lord High Fixers?

TK When he was in Dallas he got all clean, he got a pretty good job workin with computers, and he was on em all the time. He was into all the conspiracy stuff, and he had a hacker's dictionary. There's a term there called Lord High Fixers. If the hacker can't figure out what to do you go to the Lord High Fixers and they solve your problem. And he thought that would be a really great band name. Once again, it was like, if I'm gonna do this then this is for you, and here we go.

BN What comes across strongly for me is that some things are really important to you, like community and friendship, doing what you want to do. It ends up being a kind of personal politics, deferring to someone else out of friendship. It just seems to carry all the way through over the last fifteen years.

TK Yeah, but it was never somethin that was ever planned at all. I still, to this day, don't consider myself a musician. I just don't really.

JT You don't what!?!?

TK It's the same with the producin now, you know. I will never see myself as being like a record producer cause it's all real personal. It's like you're sayin, it's the politics of how I choose to live my life. Although I'm startin to learn that it doesn't really seem to matter one way or the other cause whoever's the asshole doin shit - he's at the party, and it's a year later, and everybody's kinda forgotten.

BN Why do some people have nine lives?

TK It sounds like all that hippie shit, and I don't know if I really believe it or not, but I would just as soon treat people the way I would like to be treated. And as corny as that sounds...

JT It works.

TK Well, it works for me. The bottom line is you should be responsible for what you do. If you decide you wanna get stinko clown drunk and stand on that table at the record fair...

JT Stinko clown drunk!

TK ...and yell and holler, well great. I'll probably sit there and laugh my head off and think it's great, but as long as when it's over you're responsible enough for the consequences. If they throw you out and you can't get back in, you can't blame it on anybody else.

BN It seems that with Jack O'Fire you really started to put it all together, to print slogans on the backs of the records, like, "What Are You Doing To

Participate?" You'd stick the little manifestos inside... But now I realize that all the way back in the Big Boys you were doing it too.

TK We always used to say, "Go start your own band."

BN Why did you tell people to do that?

TK It's one of those things that sounds so big-headed in an interview, like you think you're really somethin special...

BN Oh, we'll edit all this and make you sound even bigger-headed.

TK It's just that the bigger a band gets in terms of how people view you, the more unattainable it seems to them, when in reality it's real easy. There ain't nuthin to it. I mean, I'm total livin proof sittin right here that you don't know what's gonna happen next, and if you just go ahead, and go with your heart and do it, try stuff, it could be the biggest thing goin.

BN But if a big record company comes in and gives you all this money, they want to tell you how to do it. I mean, you've never had a record on a big label, you've never really had a pile of money...

TK Well, Bad Mutha kinda did, but that was a bad taste of it.

BN You've always taken a big step back from all that.

TK Because it doesn't make any sense to me. I have no problem with bands goin that route. If you want to do that, it's fine, but don't be pissin and moanin to the fanzine about this, that, and the other thing.

BN You don't have the right.

TK It was you, you were the ones who signed that piece of paper. So don't start pissin and moanin about, oh, the T-shirts cost this much, and I'm sorry you have to pay \$15 to get in to see us. You know, you signed that piece of paper, so take the responsibility.

BN So if a big label came and wanted to sign the Lord High Fixers, what would you do?

TK I'd say, thank you, and not do it.

BN I mean a really big one.

[laughter]

TK Seriously, say thank you and don't do it, cause what's the point? The records are gettin out. I mean, I've always had jobs all through this, so I never had to count on money comin from the music. With The Monkeywrench, Jack O'Fire, and the reissued Big Boys stuff, and when the Poison 13 came back out, that's the first money I've ever really seen from records, but, once again, that's not the point. So why go

with a big label? Estrus sends a check every six months for whatever we're doin, and In the Red, and Sympathy, and Dishy... and you guys found out about us. BN Did you send them a check, John? I didn't send a check.

TK It's like, in this day and age what's the point? The stuff's gonna get out. It gets out even better than it ever did. And you've heard the same story ever since Buddy Holly. It's the classic thing of the company tryin to tell him how he's gonna sound, but it's like, no, I hear what I hear. So, sorry, no thank you.

BN Up until now, whatever you want to call it - having musical antennas - you have a little bit anticipated things. Part 2 of the Big Boys really anticipates punk all of a sudden going into funk, and Poison 13 pioneered the whole trashed-out garage sound...

TK But anticipated makes it seem more like it was somethin that was thought out, when it's all just doin what you're into. It's like with the King Sound Quartet doin Sun Ra's "Space Is the Place." Let's just fuckin try it, you know? If we don't like it, we won't put it out. But if we do, we will. And there's gonna be a crew of people who are gonna go, "Man, this is great. I totally get what you're doin." Then there's gonna be a whole nother crew that are gonna be like, "This is just the worst." So, cool. That's a hundred times better than a bunch of people goin, yeah, that's okay. It's just not that thought out. But there's a lot of people who are really, like, art for them is their job, and it's work, and this is what I do, and they'll say [adopts super serious voice], okay, now I'm gonna do my funk project. Okay, that sounds cool, now I'm gonna do my soul project. Now I'm gonna do my blues band. And they don't understand about, you know, just play, and if you wanna do a funk song right after doin a Black Flag cover, do it. Who cares?

BN The thing that really got me into Jack O'Fire was that you were covering all these different songs. You weren't writing any original material, and in your choice of songs you were really mixing it up. I mean, on your first record there are blues songs, and there's also a Joy Division song, but done the same way. So all of a sudden, Joy Division's "No Love Lost" was a blues song.

TK First of all, if you go in that room back there and look at all the records, and look at what we bought today, I'm buying everything from this menu to that

other menu. That's just me. I listen to all kinds of things. It's either good or it's bad. It either has soul or it doesn't. And the reason that everything came off soundin blues was the instruments that were there. You had the stand-up bass and the harmonica.

BN But it also came out of playing Howlin' Wolf.

TK That's where the root of it was from, but then it was just like, hey, we can do "12XU."

JT There's *Pink Flag* again.

TK But that's what ended up bein the problem at the end, when we finally broke up. It was because Walter, a lot of that he couldn't hear. He really couldn't hear in his head how he could play harp to "12XU." Whereas me, I could completely hear it.

BN There's a note on *The Monkeywrench* record that says you wouldn't have punk without the blues, and that idea goes straight into Jack O'Fire.

TK There's a big group of people who really feel that way. It's just that Jack O'Fire, for some reason, kinda struck this note in a lot of people who realized, you can put them together. Wait a minute, I've always known that you can do that, and now here's somebody sayin it. Black Flag is just as soulful as Curtis Mayfield. It makes total sense. But there's always gonna be people who are just like, you must be fuckin nuts.

BN All you can say is, well, you know, you just might be right. You can't put that music together.

TK There was a big tirade about us doin "Trouble Man," that Marvin Gaye song. And they all decided we must be an art band. Jack O'Fire's turned into an art band now, just look at what they're doin. This is awful, with the vibes and everything.

BN With Jack O'Fire, when you covered songs you'd say, "these are the original lessons, and these are the teachers," but you didn't have that before. It's a very particular way of dealing with the music, to make the band like a school where these lessons are taught.

TK By the time of *The Monkeywrench*, I started comin to the realization of just how crazy this whole thing was, and how people would just believe... not so much believe, it's just the power of it or somethin, not that you feel real powerful...

BN The power of what? That you're putting something out that people listen to?

TK I don't know how to explain it

really. Just the position of power that you all of a sudden have when you're in the public. And I started realizin that, and I started thinkin, man, screw this. It's gonna be a whole lot more fun just to go back to the original source and turn this back into a big social thing, and just have fun with it again. With the Young Lions Conspiracy, they have a whole lesson on how, and I believe this, in the late '50s/early '60s all this stuff came together all of a sudden, and jazz and hillbilly and rock n'roll started tryin to say things, people started to realize that there was more to it than just entertainment.

BN That's when it became dangerous.

TK Yeah, and we're kinda takin that and throwin in the imagery of Berkeley in the '60s, all that kinda stuff that's really great, and people don't know about so much. This is somethin that really did happen. Now you know that I totally believe there's no difference at all between the rockabilly stuff and the mod stuff and the soul and whatever... and I wanna fuck with you because you think there is.

JT So it comes full circle.

TK Everything that's come out, I like, and there's a lot of people who like it too. When I say that somethin's gonna piss somebody off, it's not because I don't like it, or I'm doin that on purpose. It's just that puttin it in the context that I'm puttin it in, there's gonna be some people who aren't real happy with it. It's like the Pogues. The Pogues were great. They're a really good example of that total attitude, playin Irish traditional folk music like it should be played, with beer bottles flyin and chairs flyin, and then takin it back to the folk festival where everybody's applauding politely, and you're just jumpin into the crowd. There's gonna be people who are real annoyed by that.

BN That's the same old story. You can do this, but you have to do it our way. And sometimes your fans become your managers in the end.

TK The Cupid Car Club did one of the best things, where they passed out literature at one show that told you how you were supposed to act at the shows, and what topics you were supposed to talk about, and what you do when the first note hits, and how you dance when this song comes on... And it was great. See, if you can just realize that life is way too short, and have fun with it, you'll have a great time.

